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Viewing cable 08OTTAWA1, CANADA'S POLICY PRIORITIES FOR 2008

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08OTTAWA1	2008-01-02 17:04	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Ottawa

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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 OTTAWA 000001

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SUBJECT: CANADA'S POLICY PRIORITIES FOR 2008

REF: A. 07 OTTAWA 1928

[B.](#) 07 OTTAWA 1924

Classified By: CDA Terry Breese, reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The government of Prime Minister Harper intends to maintain a steady course in implementing the policy priorities of the October 2007 "Speech from the Throne" (reftels), while the Conservative Party's minority status in both Houses of Parliament makes demonstrable progress problematic. The government is determined to find a way to win Parliamentary support for an extension of the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan beyond February 2009, and counts on help from the upcoming recommendations of the Manley Panel. With polls showing climate change as the biggest single issue for voters, the government is striving to come up with some tangible new policies, and likely looks to forming a solid front with the U.S. and other major economies in charting a common course. In the wake of the January 1, 2008 cut in the GST, the government's tax-cutting days are over for the present, and declining surpluses may make the budget leaner in 2008 - and more difficult to pass. Key legislation on terrorism and crime remain in Parliament, but probably have sufficient support in both Houses to pass, unless there is a spring election. The government has pledged to pursue strengthened copyright legislation early in 2008, but it, too, will face tough prospects. The government plans a new strategy in 2008 to strengthen Canada's presence in the Arctic, a popular issue. However, virtually all political pundits are already looking for signs of federal elections, with the only real debate now as to whether they will come in the spring or the fall of 2008. End Summary.

PURSUING A CONSISTENT AGENDA

¶2. (C) Twenty-three months after taking office, the minority Conservative government under Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made some progress in advancing a consistent policy agenda focused on incremental change in limited priority areas: delivering "clean" and accountable government, tax cuts, reinvesting in defense, bolstering Canada's northern sovereignty, promoting national unity, and raising the profile of Canada's role abroad through its combat mission in Afghanistan, contribution to stabilization in Haiti, and renewed partnership with the Americas. However, it has had less success in pushing through a tough crime agenda, achieving a sustainable environment, ensuring democratic (Senate) reform, and introducing comprehensive copyright legislation. Meeting these objectives, and determining the future of Canada's mission in Afghanistan, will be the themes of Parliament's upcoming sitting, with the House of Commons returning on January 28 and the Senate on January 29.

WINNING SUPPORT FOR THE AFGHAN MISSION

¶3. (C) PM Harper has made clear privately and publicly that the government believes Canadian Forces should remain in Afghanistan until at least 2011, while acknowledging that Parliament will need to approve any extension of the mission beyond February 2009 (although such a vote is not a Constitutional requirement). The government is clearly counting on tangible recommendations from the independent Manley Panel in late January that could improve the political

QManley Panel in late January that could improve the political climate on this issue and broaden domestic support, but the late December death of another Canadian soldier (the 30th in 2007 and 74th overall) as well as instability in Pakistan complicate this goal. In an ideal world, Canada would like to inform NATO allies of Canada's decision at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest on April 27, but it appears increasingly possible that the Parliamentary vote may not take place until as late as May (even assuming the government remains in place). Harper wistfully admitted in a year-end interview that ""I don't know whether Canadians do - or don't - understand"" the importance of remaining involved in Afghanistan and what is at stake. The government's key challenge is to get them to understand - and soon.

PLACATING FEARS ABOUT ENVIRONMENT

¶4. (C) Climate change remains - according to polls - the single most important issue to voters, but the government has yet to convince the voting public that its policies are

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effectively addressing climate change or that it is best suited to handle the issue. While the performance of Environment Minister John Baird at the UN climate change conference in Bali won mostly negative reviews at home, Canada seems certain to continue resisting calls for near-term emissions reduction targets that it deems are too aggressive for its economy. Domestically, the government will continue to push a patchwork of energy efficiency and alternative fuels programs while it struggles to devise, implement, and enforce nationwide emissions standards. The Conservatives' most effective claim to the voters - so far - is that the Liberals had a weak record in meeting Kyoto commitments and protecting the environment while in office. Harsher than usual winter weather in late 2007 and early 2008 may, ironically, help the government to kick this can a little further down the road and give its programs more opportunity to achieve noticeable progress in the run-up to eventual elections.

ECONOMY AND THE BUDGET

¶5. (SBU) PM Harper has claimed that the Canadian economy is ""arguably the strongest in three decades." He was able to go ahead with a long-promised second cut in the federal GST, now down to 5 pct. Concerns remain high, however, about the longer-term effects of a U.S. slowdown, including possible job losses in Canada. PM Harper has already indicated that no more tax cuts are forthcoming for the foreseeable future. At the same time, the government will need to deliver its third federal budget to Parliament in February or March, and its passage is by definition a confidence vote. The Conservatives need the support of at least one other party to pass the budget. The government already used up most of its fiscal flexibility in its Fall Economic Statement, which provided C\$60 billion in broad-based personal, corporate, and sales tax relief over five years, and which Parliament approved in December. The cuts will put tax savings in voters' hands in time for spring tax-filing season. The willingness of opposition parties to support or abstain on the government's budget will probably decrease this year, however. The budget may contain regionally targeted initiatives, such as aid for the Ontario and Quebec manufacturing and forestry sectors, aimed at garnering the support of the Bloc Quebecois. PM Harper will meet with provincial premiers on January 11, at which time he will likely explain these upcoming initiatives, which he undoubtedly hopes will win some support for the budget.

PASSING TERRORISM AND CRIME BILLS

¶6. (SBU) Parliament will have to move quickly to pass amendments to Canada's system of immigration security

certificates in order to meet a February 23 deadline from the Supreme Court of Canada, or face the mandatory elimination of the use of these certificates. The bill still faces additional debate in the Commons and must also pass the Senate before that deadline, but has broad support given that it follows the Court's guidelines on how better to balance civil rights and national security. A bill to revise the Anti-Terrorism Act will be more controversial. Introduced first in the Senate and still in committee, the bill would restore two powers - investigative hearings and preventive arrest - that were subject to sunset clauses and lapsed in February 2007 when Liberal MPs voted against extending them. This time, however, the Liberals have promised to approach the bill with no ""preconceived bias.""

¶7. (SBU) Tackling crime has long been a central plank in the Conservatives' platform, but their ""safe streets"" agenda has proved difficult to push through Parliament. Five flagship crime bills introduced in 2006 all failed to pass. In October 2007, the government grouped all five bills (including some revisions reflecting opposition concerns) into a comprehensive ""Tackling Violent Crime"" bill that would establish mandatory prison sentences for serious gun crime, toughen bail provisions for serious firearms and other weapons offenses, make it easier to designate someone a dangerous offender, crack down on drug and alcohol-impaired driving, and raise the age of sexual consent to 16 years. The bill passed the House of Commons without amendment and is now in committee in the Senate. Its fate may rest on election timing. Liberal senators (who form a majority in the upper house) may have an incentive to hold the bill up in

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the short term to avoid handing an election eve gift to the Conservatives if it looks like the government may not last long into 2008. However, if the government continues to survive for the foreseeable future, the Liberals will want to avoid being tagged as ""soft on crime"" and the Senate will probably also pass the legislation.

COPYRIGHT REFORM

¶8. (SBU) After failing to introduce stronger copyright legislation in the fall 2007 session as expected, the government now plans to introduce a major copyright reform bill after Parliament returns in late January. The government has expressed confidence that the revised legislation will both placate both domestic concerns and meet international standards. Despite calls for stronger copyright protection from two parliamentary committees in 2007, recent grassroots opposition nonetheless makes passage of this legislation rough sledding ahead.

ARCTIC IMPROVEMENTS

¶9. (SBU) Voters remain concerned about the Arctic, and the public has been broadly supportive of the government's ongoing efforts to assert Canadian sovereignty and to improve its ability to defend its Arctic interests. Especially popular were programs to modernize Halifax-class frigates, to purchase new Arctic patrol ships, to deploy additional Canadian Rangers, and to develop a deep water port in the far North. The government will announce a ""Canada First"" defense strategy early in 2008 further to demonstrate its attention to this issue, as well as to bolster its long-term military modernization program, including purchases of four C-17 Globemaster strategic airlift aircraft, 17 C-130 Hercules tactical airlift aircraft, 16 CH-47 Chinook Helicopters, modern Leopard tanks, and heavy trucks. The new strategy may include purchases of new search-and-rescue aircraft and utility planes, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles, for Arctic coverage and an improved Arctic underwater surveillance system.

BUT THE BAD NEWS IS...

¶10. (C) Even with a recent poll showing 92 percent of Canadians optimistic that 2008 will be a good one for them personally (up from 88 heading into 2007) and 80 percent optimistic about Canada's prospects in the new year, the government still faces a tough year ahead. The Conservatives have come off a difficult late fall, during which their support drifted from a high of 42% in early November to a low of 30% in mid-December. However, the opposition parties -- especially the Liberals -- have not been able to gain much traction so far. This has not prevented the Liberals and New Democratic Party from stepping up their election rhetoric, with Liberal leader Stephane Dion warning voters to prepare to vote in 2008. The government's already tenuous ability to manage a fractious parliament from a minority position will face even more challenges in 2008. Increasingly, the chatter in political circles is not over whether there will be new federal elections in 2008, but rather about when - spring or fall? The growing prospects of upcoming elections make passage of any major new legislation or adoption of any major new policies extremely problematic, leaving the Conservatives in somewhat of a caretaker role. However, PM Harper has Qin somewhat of a caretaker role. However, PM Harper has shown himself an adept and shrewd parliamentary tactician, and the Conservatives retain the advantage of clarity and consistency on major issues, mostly in sync with U.S. priorities and interests.

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